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AUTHOR	Ullrich, Manuela; Kreppner, Kurt
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ABSTRACT

Noting that the dynamics of interaction in the coparenting setting, the mother-father-child triad, may change substantially during the transition to adolescence and that there is a need for an observational tool that describes both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of triadic dynamics, this study examined the Coding System for Family Triads (CST), an intensive analysis of triadic discussion from videotaped conversations. Participating in this longitudinal study were 43 two-parent Caucasian middle-class families and their oldest child at the ages of 12, 13, 14, and 15 years. Parents and their child were given a discussion topic with the instruction to read the topic from a card (for example, "When traveling together parents wish to visit a museum and the child does not. What will be the decision?") and discuss for about 2 minutes. Categories developed for the rating scale were: (1) formal aspects, such as who takes the card and who reads the discussion topic; (2) global rating of the triad, including seating arrangement, dominance of one dyad, outsider, closeness/cohesion, and openness; (3) child in front of parents, comprised of child as the center rating and child's orientation toward parents; and (4) course of discussion, including taking up the topic, triadic connection, dynamic, and solution when finished. The findings indicated that children experienced notably different communication environments according to the parent-parent communication quality. Discussions became more distant during the transition to adolescence, with increasing disagreements, declining cohesion, and more hypothetical discussion. Few gender differences were identified. (Contains 11 references.) (KB)

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Discussions in Parent-Child-Triads during Transition to Adolescence: Developing New Categories

Manuela Ullrich[1] & Kurt Kreppner[2]

[1] Humboldt University at Berlin, [2] Max-Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin

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Manuela Ullrich

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Correspondence concerning this poster should be addressed to:
Dr. Manuela Ullrich
Humboldt University at Berlin, Philosophical Faculty IV
Institute for Educational Psychology
Geschwister-Scholl-Str. 7
10099 Berlin
Germany
e-mail: manuela.ullrich@rz.hu-berlin.de

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Summary

A new category system attempts to describe verbal and nonverbal aspects of triadic dynamics. The focus of rating was always the triad as a whole.

Triadic discussions between mother, father and oldest child were videotaped in families' homes repeatedly, when the child was 12, 13, 14 and 15 years old.

Categories divide in four domains:

formal aspects:	**taker of the card**
	reader of the discussion topic
global rating of the triad:	**seating arrangement**
	dominance of one dyad
	outsider
	closeness/cohesion
	openness
child in front of parents:	**child as the center**
	child's orientation towards parents
course of discussion:	**taking up the topic**
	triadic connection
	dynamic
	solution when finished

Frequency distributions were analyzed according to parent-parent communication pattern, gender of child and time.

- **Children experience a different communication environment according to parent-parent communication quality.**
- **Discussions become more distant during transition to adolescence.**
- **Only few gender differences were found.**

Introduction

Dynamics of interaction in the coparenting setting, that is the mother-father-child-triad, seem to be strongly influenced by marital conflict and affect children's development (Cox et al., 1989, Cowan & McHale, 1996; Kitzmann, 2000; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). Once established, these dynamics or patterns of family interaction might subsist over several phases in the cycle of family development, but also might change profoundly, for example during transition to adolescence. So far, research on adolescents focused rather on the verbal aspects of argumentation during problem solving and discussions with parents (Allen et al, 1994; Cooper et al., 1983; Powers, 1989; Vuchinich et al., 1989).

Assessment of triadic dynamics might produce difficulties because of the complex relation of three dyads. The specifically developed category system attempts to describe verbal and nonverbal aspects of triadic dynamics as well as to consider aspects that go beyond the quality of the dyadic relationships.

Research Questions

- Is it possible to outline categories that depict verbal and nonverbal aspects of triadic mother-father-child discussions reliably?
- Do triadic discussions differ according to child's gender?
- Do triadic discussions differ according to parent-parent communication patterns in the family?
- Do triadic discussions change during transition to adolescence?

Method

Sample

43 two-parent-families (Caucasian, middle-class)

sample is part of a larger project (Kreppner, 1995; Kreppner & Ullrich, 1998)

total of **742 observed discussions**

Longitudinal Observation of Triads- Videotaped

mother-father-child in discussion (structured)

child's age **12, 13, 14, 15 years**

presentation of discussion topics: text printed on cards

instruction: read the cards aloud and discuss it for about 2 minutes

Example of Discussion Topic

When traveling together the parents wish to visit a museum. The child does not feel like it. What will be the decision?

Development of Coding System for Family Triads (CST)

intensive analysis of triadic discussion from videotape

verbal descriptions of obvious contrasts between families

condensation: 13 categories with 3 to 5 levels

composition of behavior examples for all levels of each category (training video)

Training of coders

no previous information about families

general explication of intention of the CST

explaining single categories and illustration by training video

discussion of first codings

supervision of coding on regular basis

→ **check of reliability** with unknown material
(32 discussions of 8 randomly selected families)

Coding System for Family Triads (CST)

Domain	Category (kappa)	Levels
Formal aspects	Taker of the Card (.92) Reader (1.00)	1. child 2. mother 3. father
Global Rating of Triad	Seating Arrangement: Person in Center (1.00)	1. child 2. mother 3. father
	Dominance of one Dyad (.87)	1. parents 2. mother-child 3. father-child 4. none
	Outsider (.82)	1. child 2. mother 3. father 4. nobody
	Closeness (.65)	1. very high 2. high 3. some 4. low
	Openness (.79)	1. open/relaxed 2. estranged - not open 3. tensed up - closed
Child in front of Parents	Child as Center (.85)	1. foreground - center of interaction 2. parents turn to child 3. participates, present observantly 4. child excluded - absent
	Child's Orientation (.84)	1. to mother 2. to father 3. to both parents 4. neither nor
Course of Discussion	Taking up the Topic (.62)	1. in everyday manner, concretely 2. superficial 3. abstractly - hypothetically 4. foolishly - defensive
	Triadic Connection (.71)	1. easily, liquid 2. with vagueness 3. not related - separated 4. artificial - pseudo 5. scattered - against each other
	Dynamic (.86)	1. monadic 2. dyadic 3. two dyads 4. triadic
	Solution when Finished (.81)	1. consensus 2. one person decides 3. two decide 4. separate but accepted 5. rupture - no solution

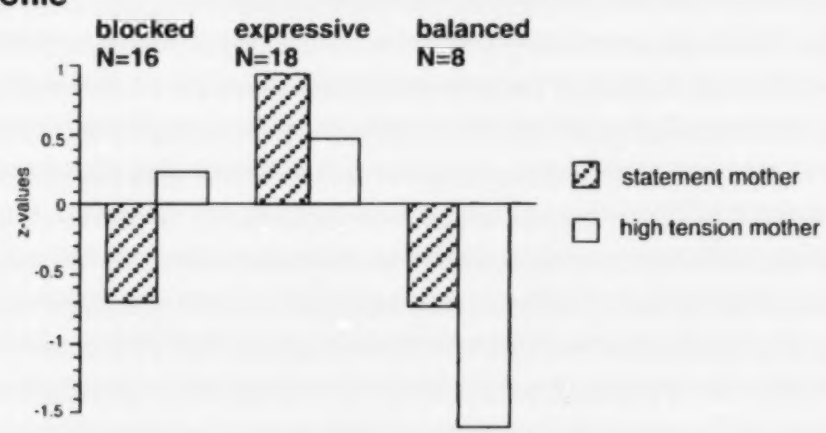
Data Analysis

Frequency distributions of each category were analyzed according to:

Child's Gender:	**boy**
	girl
Time:	**age 12**
	age 13
	age 14
	age 15
Parent-Parent Communication:	**blocked**
	expressive
	balanced

Previous analyses of dyadic parent-parent discussions revealed three clusters of different communication patterns characterized as "blocked" (n=16), "expressive" (n=18) and "balanced" (n=8) (for details see Ullrich, 1999).

Cluster Profile



Two series of Log-linear Models:

- Child's **Gender** by **Time** by Observational **Category**[1]
- Cluster of **Parent-Parent Communication** by **Time** by Observational **Category**[2]

Results

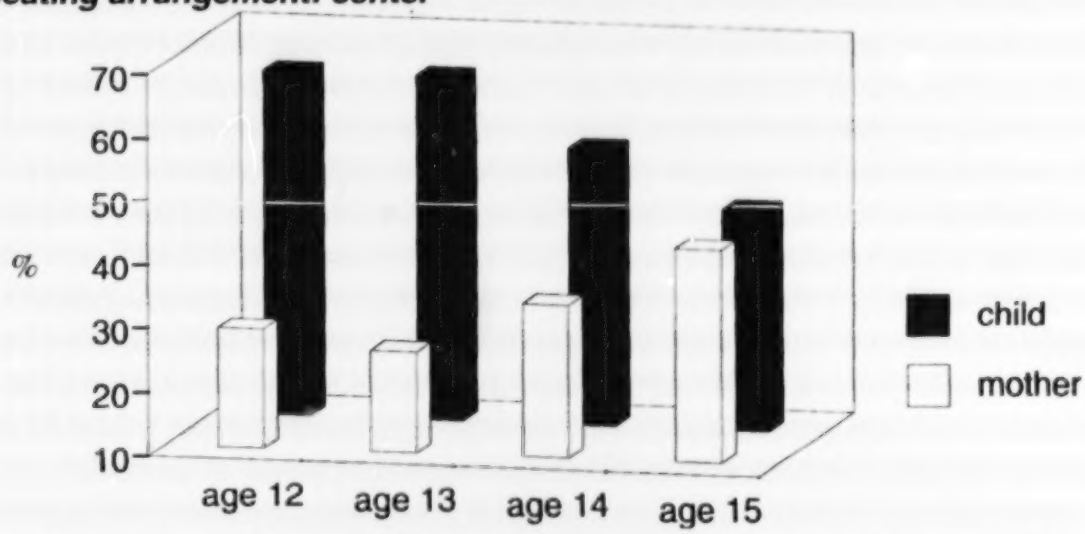
- According to child's **gender**, differences in triadic family discussions were found only in **four** aspects (GO-interactions and saturated models).[1]
- Triadic family discussions differed notably according to **parent-parent communication quality**. Significant differences were found in **nine** of the categorized aspects (CO-interactions and saturated models). [2]
- Additionally, family discussions varied over **time,** during the child's transition to adolescence (TO-interactions and saturated models).[1&2]

Category	[1] Gender by Time Model	sig.	[2] Parent Comm. by Time Model	sig.
Formal aspects				
Taker of the Card	**G, TO**	.62	**sat.**	
Reader	**TO, GO**	.19	**T, C, O**	.51
Global Rating of Triad				
Seating Arrangement	**sat.**		**TO, CO**	.12
Dominance of one Dyad	**G, TO**	.17	**TO, CO**	.56
Outsider	**G, TO**	.81	**TO, CO**	.67
Closeness	**G, TO**	.14	**TO, CO**	.70
Openness	**G, TO**	.33	**TO, CO**	.52
Child in front of Parents				
Child as Center	**TO, GO**	.49	**C, TO**	.48
Child's Orientation	**sat.**		**TO, CO**	.57
Course of Discussion				
Taking up the Topic	**G, TO**	.85	**C, TO**	.08
Triadic Connection	**G, TO**	.26	**TO, CO**	.84
Dynamic	**G, TO**	.58	**sat.**	
Solution when Finished	**G, TO**	.59	**C, TO**	.88

TO = interaction time x observational category
GO = interaction gender x observational category
CO = interaction cluster x observational category
sat. = saturated model

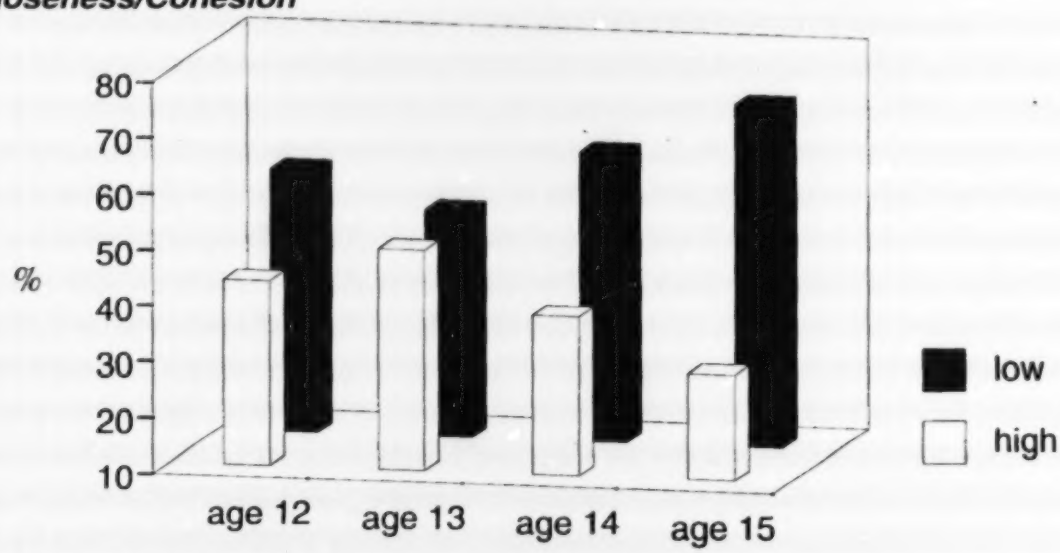
Changes in triadic discussions during transition to adolescence

Seating arrangement: center



Over time, families modify their seating arrangement: instead of the child, the mother is sitting in the center more frequently.

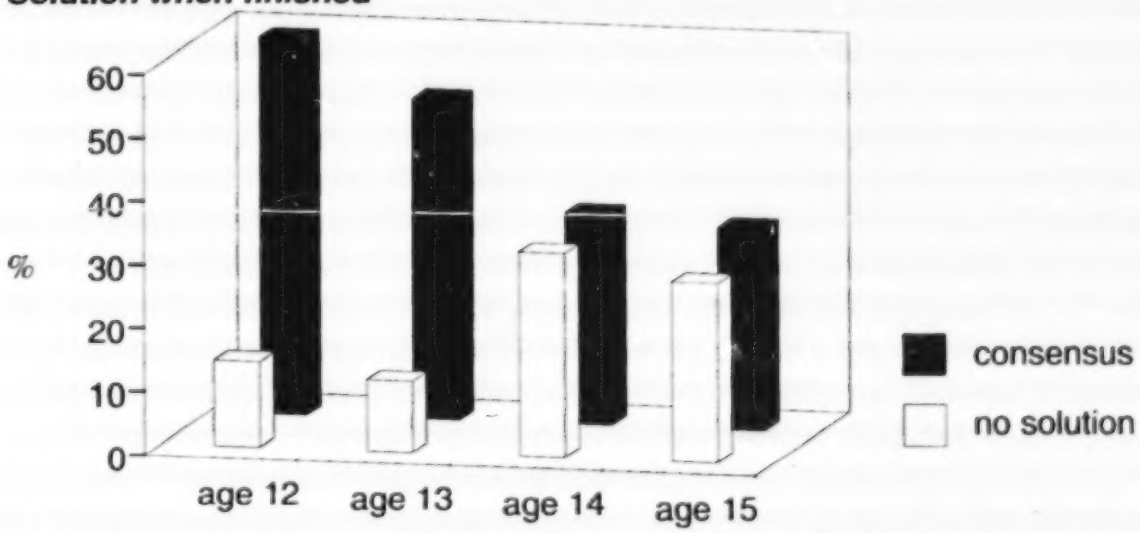
Closeness/Cohesion



Family cohesion declines.

Changes in triadic discussions, *cont.*

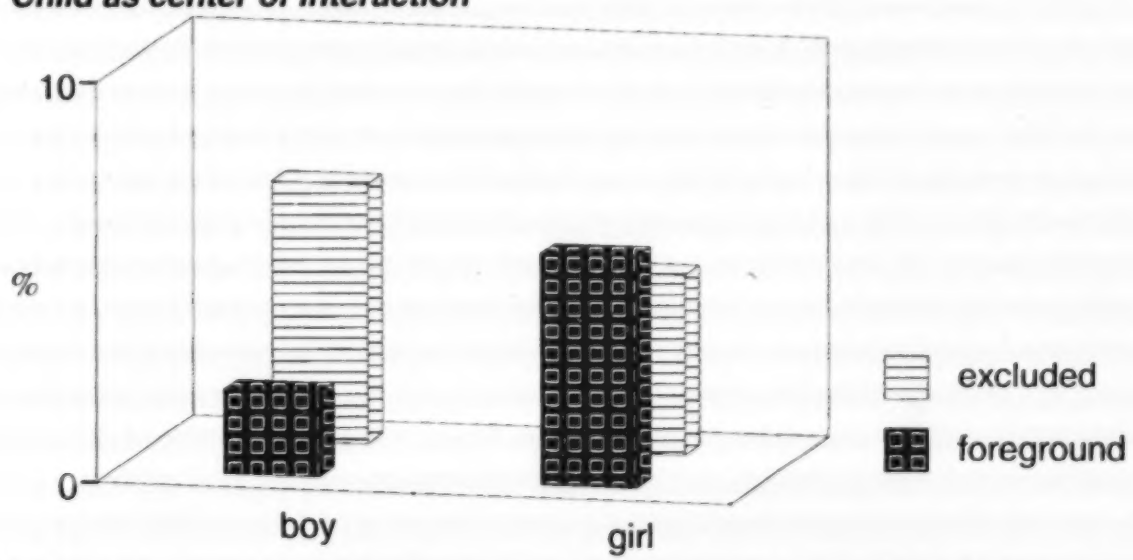
Solution when finished



Increasingly, families break up their discussions without coming to an accepted solution.

Differences according to child's gender

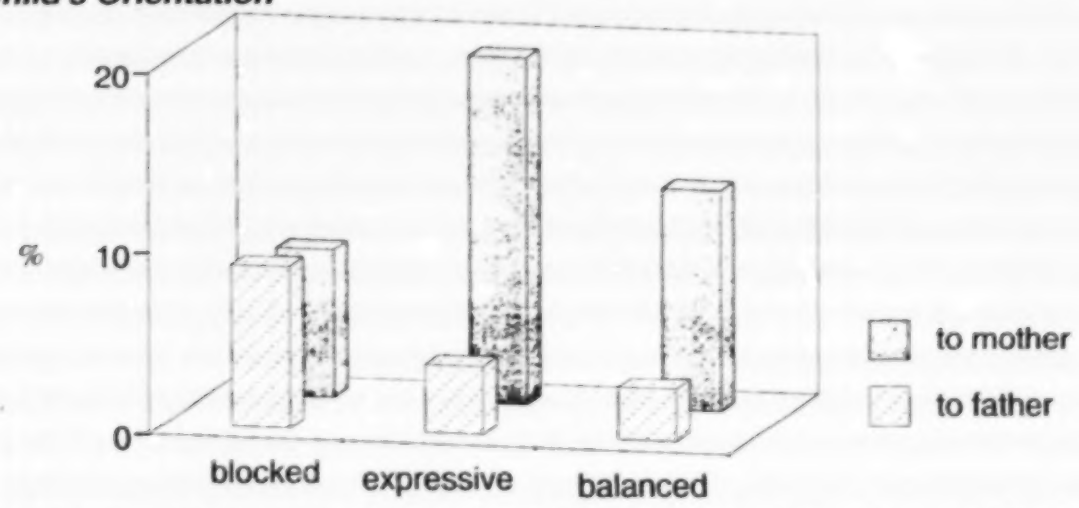
Child as center of interaction



When interacting with their parents, girls stand out more often than boys do.

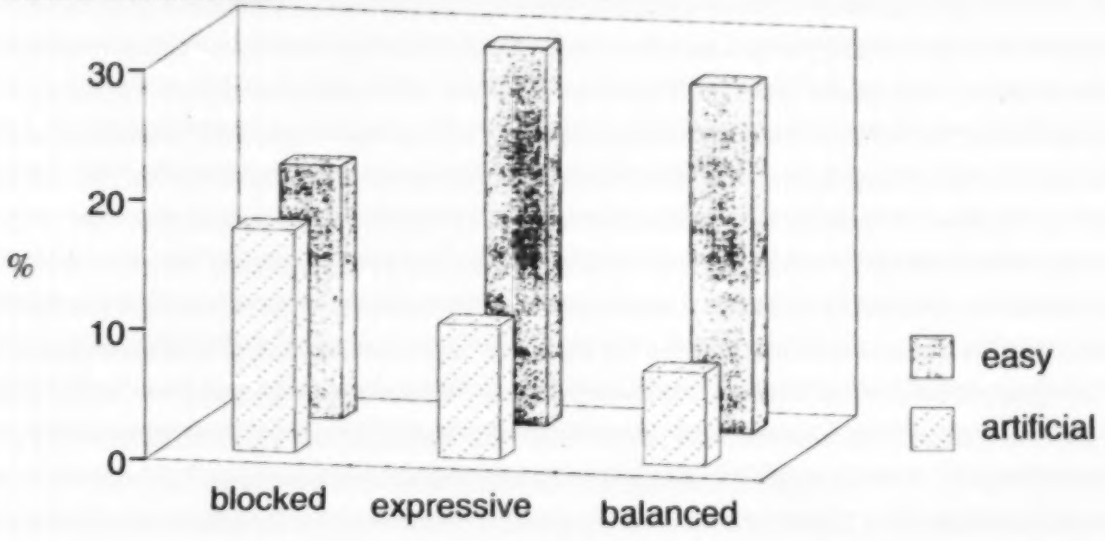
Parent-Parent Communication patterns and triadic discussions

Child's Orientation



When parents' communication is blocked, children turn towards their mother less often.

Triadic Connection



When parents' communication is blocked, the flow in triadic discussion is more artificial.

Summary of Results

During the first child's transition to adolescence, family discussions between mother, father and child change considerably. Cohesion declines, and disagreements increase. Moreover, discussions become more hypothetical, defensive and tensed up.

Differences in discussions according to child's gender seem to be rare and of minor importance.

Parent-parent communication patterns are strongly related to communication behavior and climate when the child is present. The child's own behavior depends on parents' relationship, for example his/her orientation towards the mother.

Discussion

The presented category system was developed to describe family triads as a whole. It combines well-known and new aspects in rating triadic dynamics. For example, outsiders, as well as seating arrangements already were assessed in other studies (Bowen, 1976; Jory et al., 1996). Two general issues are reflected by the new categories: the relation child parental dyad and the course of discussion concerning semantic and non-verbal markers of inner triadic connection. Sufficient interrrater reliability was obtained. Longitudinal analysis revealed significant change during the child's transition to adolescence as well as expected differences according to parent-parent communication patterns.

Child's gender does not seem to have a crucial influence on the characteristic of triadic family dynamics. Much more importance may be credited to parent-parent communication patterns. When parents alone seem to be able to communicate in a relaxed or in an expressive manner as opposed to an emotionally negative manner, family dynamics differ accordingly.

Of course, dynamics in family triads do not exclusively depend on the parent-parent relationship. Nevertheless, during family transitions communication between parents might be a key to understanding how families establish their specific communication culture that appears to be crucial for the development of their children.

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